

STATEMENT OF THOMAS A. WEBER, ASSOCIATE CHIEF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT
February 26, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss water resource program activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In my remarks today, I would like to describe our ongoing work in this area, and discuss our budget and priorities for FY 2005. I will specifically address three accounts; 1) Watershed Surveys and Planning, 2) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, and 3) Watershed Rehabilitation.

The NRCS water resource programs provide communities and landowners site-specific technical expertise for watershed planning and financial assistance for watershed project implementation. They provide a process to solve local natural resource problems, including flood damage mitigation, water quality improvement, ensuring an adequate

rural water supply, water conservation, soil erosion control, and fish and wildlife habitat improvement.

The Watershed Program has implemented projects in thousands of communities across the country, improving natural resources, restoring fish and wildlife habitat, mitigating or protecting the flood plain from flood damages, and accelerating economic development. The Watershed Program was founded upon the principle of locally-driven, watershed scale conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts.

These watershed projects empower local people as decision-makers to build State and local partnerships, and to acquire funding contributions.

NRCS assists in every step of planning and implementation of watershed projects, but primarily serves as a technical advisor, bringing science, technology, and knowledge about the resource base and ecosystem of the watershed, as well as a source of funding, to develop these projects.

The sponsoring organization must also be responsible for project operation and maintenance.

FY 2005 Budget Proposal

The 2002 Farm Bill represents an unprecedented commitment to conservation and the President's 2005 budget for NRCS will continue to focus on implementing the important conservation programs authorized by this historic legislation. These priorities will have an impact on the budget levels being proposed in the watershed programs area. The budget proposes reductions in funding for watershed implementation, planning, and rehabilitation. This will enable NRCS to redirect limited resources to address the more pressing Farm Bill implementation work while still funding the most critical watershed projects that have the strongest local support. With emergency spending being so difficult to predict, the budget proposes to not seek appropriated funding for emergency work and instead to address disaster funding as emergencies arise.

Watershed Surveys and Planning

The Watershed Surveys and Planning account helps communities and local sponsors assess resource issues and develop a coordinated watershed plan that will conserve and utilize their water and land resources, and to solve the local natural resource and related economic problems. The product from this effort is a planning document, which guides both the local sponsors and technical experts in the implementation of a watershed effort authorized under P.L. 83-566.

The President's budget for FY 2005 proposes to focus new Watershed Survey and Planning efforts on improving the environmental and economic benefits of new projects.

The budget request is \$5,083,000 to help 20-30 communities complete their watershed planning efforts.

Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations

The Watershed Surveys and Planning component in 2005 will focus on non-structural flood measures that will solve the identified natural resource and economic problems in the area. The local sponsors have responsibility to secure necessary land rights; obtain Federal, State, and local permits; pay a share of installation costs; and provide for operation and maintenance of the project.

The Administration's budget proposal requests \$40,173,000 for projects authorized under P.L. 83-566 for funding in the Watershed and Flood Prevention account to focus on developing and funding non-structural flood prevention measures. For the 11 projects authorized by the Flood Control Act, Public Law 78-534, no funding is proposed.

Watershed Rehabilitation

The President's budget funding request for FY 2005 includes funding for Watershed Rehabilitation activities involving aging dams. These projects involve dams with a high risk for loss of life and property. To date, 118 watershed rehabilitation projects have been funded and eighteen have been completed. Forty-one dams have rehabilitation plans authorized and implementation of the plans is underway. The remaining 59 projects are in the planning phase. The Administration requests \$10,091,000 to complete two plans in progress and ten projects currently underway.

Summary

In summary, it is our priority to address the needs of communities for the most critical water resource concerns to effectively utilize Federal, State, and local programs to meet immediate needs. We will continue to work with local communities to prioritize and evaluate our activities so that the financial and technical resources that are available can be placed where they are most needed.

I thank the Subcommittee and would be happy to respond to any questions.